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Peer Review of Learning and Teaching: Cardiff University's approach to peer-assisted scholarly reflective practice.

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Introduction and the Institutional context:

In 2004 the University of Cardiff and the University of Wales College of Medicine (UWCM) merged. At the point of merger the new Cardiff University commissioned a number of initiatives to explore existing practices and create policies and processes that would engender a new shared culture in learning and teaching within the merged institution: Peer Review of Learning and Teaching (PRLT) was one of these projects.

All projects recognised that Cardiff University is research-led, has a strong focus on teaching and the support of student learning but with each discipline having its own priorities, language, and culture with respect to learning, teaching and the process under consideration. Projects were also mindful of the increasing emphasis being placed upon institutions to provide continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for staff involved in student learning and for staff to demonstrate a commitment to CPD in order to remain in good standing with relevant professional bodies.

Developing the process:

Engagement and empowerment were key elements in the development of the new PRLT Policy Framework. After consultation, it was decided that PRLT should be focused upon the student learning experience and be underpinned by three key elements: reflection, development and enhancement. Staff from across the University wanted their contribution to student learning noticed and a culture of openness and sharing developed in which 'talking about your teaching' was a valued activity. The consultation process suggested that staff would 'buy into' a new approach to PRLT if it was:

- flexible,;
- simple to implement;
- embraced the whole teaching role;
- empowering and inclusive of staff whatever their role in the students' learning experience;
- promoted fair access to development resources for all staff;
- supported staff commitment to enhancing the student learning experience;
- seen as non-judgemental, confidential to the peer pair/group;
- constructive, mutually beneficial component of continuous personal development;
- aimed to promote excellence in learning and teaching.

Describing the process:

1) The umbrella analogy:

Crucial to the success of the new policy framework was its ability to align with the everyday activities of all staff who support student learning. The project team therefore used an umbrella analogy to show that staff and student development was

embraced under the umbrella (Figure 1), with the umbrella fabric representing the varied roles and activities that make up the students' learning experience (Figure 2). The umbrella fabric was intended to make visible the breadth of activities that could be developed to suit the needs of specific individuals or teams of staff. Any activity identified on the umbrella fabric was deemed to be 'suitable' for peer-assisted critical reflective dialogue.

Figure 1: An holistic approach to PRLT

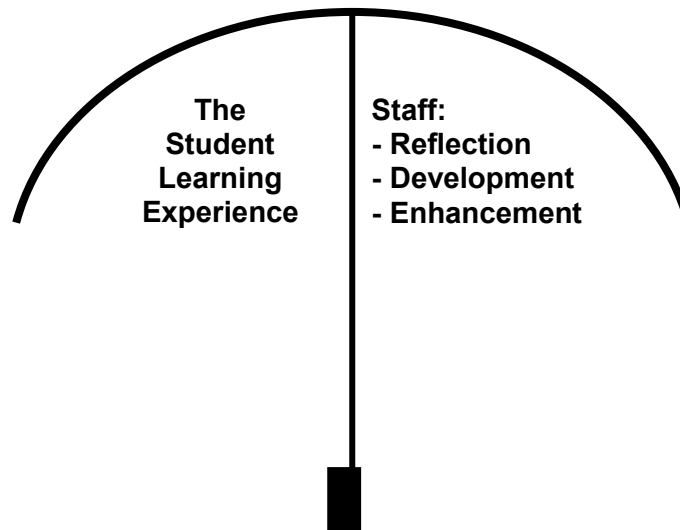
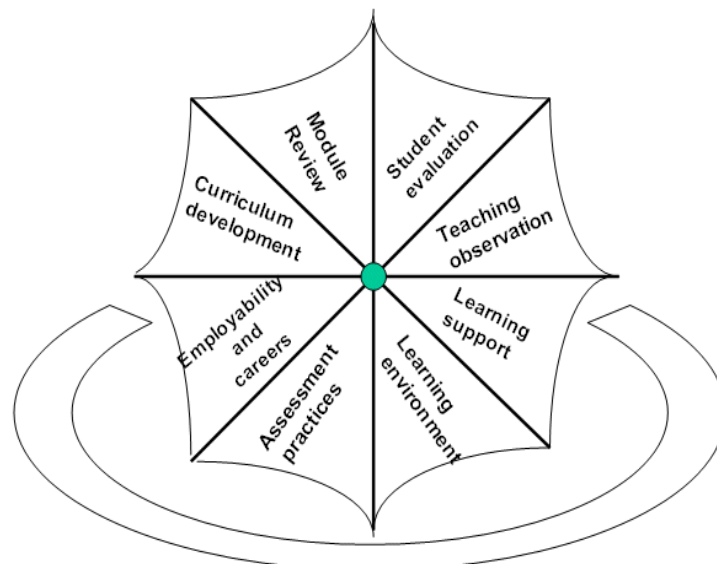


Figure 2: Some possible foci



The PRLT

Policy Framework was adopted by Cardiff University in February 2006 with implementation supported by a comprehensive website¹ linking possible evidence-collection tools, reflective practice guides etc.

¹ <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/learning/themes/peerrev/index.html>

2) How does PRLT work in practice?

Rationale and underpinning values:

The University's approach to PRLT offers participants the opportunity to reflect on their teaching/learning support practice. PRLT is intended to promote dialogue focussed on professionalism in teaching (as underpinned by the value statements in Box 1²) across the breadth of teaching/learning support roles, and is based upon peer-assisted, scholarly reflective practice.

Box 1: PRLT's underpinning values

In accordance with the University Mission, the PRLT process is underpinned by the following values.

- An understanding of how people learn
- A concern for student development
- A commitment to scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice
- A commitment to working with and learning from colleagues
- Working effectively with diversity and promoting inclusivity
- A commitment to continuing reflection on professional practice.

Who is involved?

All University staff whose activities directly impact on the student learning experience are involved in the PRLT cycle. All staff with significant learning and teaching duties are expected to complete an identifiable PRLT cycle once per academic year. Staff whose main employer is not the University, but who have some teaching related responsibilities, take part in a PRLT cycle at least biennially. Completion rates are collected annually through the University's Quality Assurance monitoring processes. PRLT dialogues can be set up to suit the needs of the individuals and Schools / Directorates involved and cross-discipline dialogue is encouraged.

Key elements to the PRLT Dialogue.

The Policy Framework recommended the following features to underpin PRLT dialogues:

- Confidentially resting with participants;
- An initial peer discussion to set the context, purpose and scope of PRLT;
- Peer-assisted reflective practice that is informed by evidence collected by the peer partners. The PRLT dialogue should not be based upon subjective opinions;
- Peer-assisted reflective practice that is supported by related discipline-specific or generic literature and evidence collected during the review cycle;
- A non-judgemental dialogue where staff feel safe to reflect on their established practice and underpinning values;
- Confidential reflections exploring the benefits of engaging with PRLT, the selected theme and possible implications for personal practice;
- A system for staff to disseminate examples of practice or seek advice for specific development;

² Explicitly aligned with the Professional Values stated within the UK PSF and by SEDA to help staff collect the evidence that might inform their personal CPD activities.

- A system that closes the loop and helps staff see the benefits of the PRLT activity and dissemination e.g. through Appraisal and preparation of an application for recognition against the National Professional Standards Framework.

The process of choosing the focus of a PRLT dialogue varies across the Institution with many staff free to select a focus / set an explicit question for the review. In addition, some Schools and Departments use PRLT to help community dialogue by suggesting an annual 'theme' for the review processes across their staff. Such an approach uses PRLT as a vehicle through which other policy initiatives can be achieved. For example focussing on departmental assessment practices could help staff address pertinent issues arising from implementation of the University's Assessment Strategy. PRLT, therefore, is intended to become a meaningful and useful activity to both individuals and groups of staff.

3) PRLT-in-action: what has been tried?

Staff across the Institution have experimented with PRLT in each of the foci suggested in Figure 2. There is not space here to discuss each in detail, instead we present four short case studies of PRLT-in-action and would welcome the opportunity to discuss other ideas with colleagues on request:

- Box 2: group learning in another language;
- Box 3: marking proforma and assignment feedback sheet review;
- Box 4: module redesign
- Box 5: on-line tutoring.

The contributors have then reflected upon their experiences and compiled a summary of the issues that in our view make or break the PRLT experience.

Box 2:

Focus: Group learning – observation when you know nothing of the class' language

Specific question set by teacher:

- What is going on in my small group? How are all the students responding to the lesson?

PRLT participants: Language teacher + science-based teacher

What we did in advance of the data collection:

- met and talked about our teaching, what we thought teaching was for, how that showed to our students etc;
- the specific session and the forms of data collecting that might help us explore the set question.

Form of evidence:

- Data collection: transcript of lesson. Session content impossible due to language barrier! Focus therefore on who spoke first, whether response initiated by self or given in response, non-verbal interactions within group, direction of verbal and non-verbal interaction;
- Data transformation: response grid by participant; interactions chart

Ensuing PRLT dialogue:

- evidence-based framed around transcript and charts; wide ranging discussion and exploration of 'group learning' literature to try and make sense of data.

Output:

- plans for trying out next time –again to be the focus of a data collection activity;
- lots of mutual learning about teaching in general and small groups in particular;
- evidence for our portfolios both about L+T but also forms of qualitative data collecting!

Would you do anything differently next time?

- No! Took time but a great experience for us both – put the buzz back into teaching.

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Box 3:

Focus: PRLT of Marking Proforma and Essay Feedback Sheets

Specific questions set by teachers:

- Does the feedback sheet cover all important aspects relating to the assessment? Is the feedback given to students clear and focused? Is the feedback for learning or just of learning? Does it relate to what the students have experienced in the course and gives them useful guidance which they can use for further written (or other) work?

PRLT participants: Marketing teacher and Psychology teacher

What we did in advance of the data collection:

- We discussed different PRLT foci that might be useful for us and through this discussion uncovered a mutual need for a review of our marking sheets/feedback.

Form of evidence:

- The marking sheets, proformas and feedback sheets to students as well as detail on the project/assessment taking place. This involved both blank feedback structures and also examples of anonymised feedback provided to individual students.
- Evidence of other types/styles of feedback and marking practices.

Ensuing PRLT dialogue:

- The dialogue was based around the evidence provided but also explored the student feedback and assessment literatures.
- The cross disciplinary nature of this PRLT process allowed a variety of different viewpoints and departmental structures to be explored.

Output:

- The PRLT provided evidence for both our Postgraduate Certificate in University Teaching and Learning portfolios.
- The process provided impetus to a meaningful and useful redesign of the sheets/feedback processes involved.

Would you do anything differently next time?

- The PRLT in this case prompted a process of redesign of the processes and forms involved. It might therefore have been useful to extend the PRLT process into this redesign process fully, using the expertise and viewpoints of each party throughout.

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Box 4:

Focus: Module Design: constructive alignment in action?

Specific questions set by teachers:

- What does this module look like from the students' perspective? Is it an example of constructive alignment-in-action?

PRLT participants:

- Lecturers in Radiography Education and Physiotherapy Education

What we did in advance of the review meeting:

- Communicated our teaching philosophy and how our teaching is affected by our different backgrounds and personalities;
- Discussed the purpose of the module to be considered and its place within the Radiography Curriculum;
- Framed the question for the review so that we could decide what forms of evidence to bring to the meeting.

Forms of evidence:

- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales Level Descriptors;
- Bloom's Taxonomy and 'verb' lists;
- Radiography Education's QAA Benchmark Statement and Subject Benchmark Indicators;
- Society of Radiography's Curriculum Framework document;
- Cardiff University's Assessment Strategy;
- Biggs (2003).

Ensuing PRLT dialogue:

- 'Big picture' rationale for the module and its link to the rest of the year and future professional practice;
- What the module was intended to help students learn and whether what had been created would 'do' that in practice?
- The pros and cons of constructive alignment as a form of Module design.

Output:

- 'messy' evidence for PCUTL portfolio;
- Mapping document to inform Department's Annual Progress Review and Evaluation process.

Would you do anything differently next time?

- No, it was really helpful having to explain the module to someone outside the discipline. Through their eyes we could start to see the module from the students' perspective – and it didn't really look quite like we had assumed!

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Box 5

Focus: PRLT of on-line tutoring:

Specific questions set by teachers:

- Can an effective system of online PRLT be created?
- How do you create an on-line scholarly reflective dialogue?

PRLT participants:

- Worldwide tutors of an online distance learning Dermatology programme;
- PRLT occurred in pairs allocated by the Cardiff-based programme administration team.

What we did in advance of the data collection:

- A needs assessment for the tutors via an online questionnaire;
- Invited peer partners to have an online discussion via email to compare their understanding of the guidance notes and share plans for their peer review.

Form of evidence:

- 'Observed' asynchronous online learning activity, gathering evidence based upon areas for discussion as determined in the pre-review discussions

Ensuing PRLT dialogue:

- Peer partners had access to each other's 'med-e-conference' task so that they could view the discussion board and the messages being posted by both students and the tutor.
- Peer partners then emailed each other during the conference to discuss ideas and progress with a final 'discussion' at the end to summarise thoughts for each other and the process in general.

Output:

- The PRLT evidence and 'conversations' confidential to the tutors involved and used to form evidence of Continuing Professional Development for their registration portfolios;
- A summary of the pair's thoughts on the process returned to the central department in recognition that this was the first time that such an on-line PRLT had been attempted with this programme;
- Central department-led asynchronous online focus group to evaluate the PRLT process.

Would you do anything differently next time?

- Tutors were enthusiastic about the process and found it reassuring to have someone to support them but didn't participate as fully as we had hoped;
- Next time we will have clearer web links to sample online PRLTs;
- Facilitate peer partner self-selection as wished;
- Encourage participants to use their usual online forums for discussion rather than adding in an email element.

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Lessons learnt: reflections of some PRLT participants

Reflecting on our experience in a variety of roles within the PRLT process, the authors have identified the following elements as essential for achieving a mutually-beneficial, non-judgmental outcome:

- 1) Negotiated ownership of the process;
- 2) overt discussion about individuals' perception of PRLT and their past experience of other 'schemes';
- 3) discussion of each other's underlying rationale and conceptions of learning and teaching;
- 4) creativity in collecting appropriate evidence upon which the PRLT dialogue will be based;
- 5) dialogue framed about questions to facilitate reflective practice;
- 6) ability to use the output in several ways.

Some of these issues were evident in the Policy Framework documents (referred to above) but here we explain their relevance to our specific PRLT practice.

1) Ownership

Giving staff ownership of PRLT is seen as recognition of the autonomy with which academic staff carry out many of their roles (Shortland, 2004) and is likely to result in the development of a flexible process that could be tailored to individual / local contexts and needs (Blackwell and Preece, 2001). While the PRLT process operates within an institutional framework, a critical first step is to facilitate local and individual ownership. We found that nomenclature was a key element in the process of achieving 'ownership'. At Institutional level it was assumed that, in PRLT, the R stands for 'Review' - an assumption based upon the perception that, in a research-led environment, 'review' reflects developmental, non-threatening feedback. But, at local level, it has been necessary to deconstruct that term in relation to the norms and dialogue of each discipline. As a consequence, while the PRLT process is adopted across Cardiff, the 'R' may stand for 'review' or 'reflection' or simply represent a shared understanding of a process of 'collaborative reflection', 'support', 'peer-assisted reflection', 'reflective dialogue' etc. It has been important to allow the PRLT policy to be translated into meaningful local practice which is aligned with opportunities and challenges in each specific context.

2) Who am I and how do I teach?

We found in the pilot phase of PRLT (Kell and Lloyd, 2006), that, in order to encourage an evidence-based approach to peer assisted reflection, it was essential that each participant was able to articulate their own philosophical approach to teaching and their conceptions of both learning and teaching (Rosenfeld and Rosenfeld, 2004). Such self-analysis was seen as an opportunity to understand the perspective from which each participant was engaging in the PRLT process. This promoted curiosity in different teaching approaches and reduced the likelihood of the PRLT dialogue becoming standardised and judgmental. Specific resources that have been found to be useful in this reflection process are the work of Rezler and French (1975), Samuelowicz and Bain (2001), Rosenfeld and Rosenfeld (2004), and Wheeler and Marshall (1986).

While such deep reflection is not appropriate for all PRLT participants, 'getting-to-know-myself' is an important precursor to an 'getting-to-know-each-other'. In practice participants are encouraged to engage in reflection at least at the following stages of the process:

- The reviewee (owner of the PRLT focus) analyses themselves to explore possible review foci that would be useful to their teaching development;
- The reviewer analyses themselves to identify common ground and differences and how that will affect the ensuing evidence-collection and reflective dialogue.

Key questions are

- what is my teaching philosophy?
- what teacher and learner type am I?
- what previous experiences do I have of peer review?
- what previous experience do I have of what might be reviewed?
- what were the results of my reflection about it?
- what focus would I like for the observation?
- what evidence/ data to inform my practice do I need?
- what are my expectations of the process?

3) Perception of the process

Blackwell et al (2001) and Gosling (2002) recommend that departments help staff verbalise their perceptions about peer review in order to make overt and then clarify their fears, anxieties and beliefs. Expectations of the value of PRLT arise from past experiences of related teaching dialogues and also perceptions of the principles underpinning the activity and the reasons for its undertaking. Each of these factors has a significant impact on an individual's approach to the PRLT process and should be overtly considered within the PRLT pairs/ triads teams etc in addition to the 'whole department' discussions about the process that may have already taken place. While we would advocate this 'step' in the process for all participants, it is particularly important when new staff are being integrated into the culture of the department. This observation was especially striking in one PRLT pilot site, where new staff, in health-related practice, had experienced a similarly-termed process but in which the review was undertaken by 'seniors' within a competency-based and judgemental ethos (Kell and Annetts 2009). A useful tool to facilitate these discussions and unpack perceptions is the Peer Observation of Teaching Model Grid (Gosling, 2002) with staff being invited to read and circle (in different colours) the words that match their past experience / current perception and those that represent their more ideal process (please see Appendix 1 for the exercise sheet).

This element of the PRLT process is intended to help participants identify and / or create a common language and understanding which is relevant to their needs and context. While we would argue that such an understanding is essential whatever the PRLT foci and whoever the peers involved, it is particularly important for reviews framed about teaching observation and assessment / marking / feedback practices and those reviews undertaken across courses, disciplines and Schools / Faculties.

4) Collecting the evidence

Fundamental to the achievement of a mutually beneficial peer-assisted reflection of a learning activity is the collection of meaningful, robust, non-personal and relevant evidence (Pill, 2005). Shortland (2004) describes how a mismatch between PRLT rhetoric and practice can occur when staff use closed questions or forms of evidence that require performance to be scored. Participants must decide whether or not to use checklists. The problem is that checklists tend to prescribe ideas of what should be reviewed, do not encourage flexibility, can be judgemental and may not be consistent with the PRLT philosophy. Although some form of confirmation that the process has been completed is required, those involved can design their own data collection tools to meet their individual goals.

Key questions for overt consideration by PRLT partners are:

- What is the focus of the review and what specific questions / issues are we hoping to explore?
- What 'research' skills do we have that we can use in this context? E.g. what form of evidence could be collected to address these questions? How will confidentiality and data protection issues be addressed?
- If the evidence is in the form of documentation (e.g. module outlines, subject benchmark indicators, assessment criteria etc) how are we going to interrogate the evidence for the purposes of the ensuing discussion?
- How will the data be presented as a resource for facilitating reflective practice?

Experience suggests that creativity at this phase of the PRLT process can have a major impact on the outcome. Indeed Shortland (2004) recommends that partners explicitly consider how to take peer review beyond the standard observation of a classroom or lecture. Within our research-led institution, the access point for making PRLT relevant to staff has been the overt linking of PRLT to the research process. For example, where observation of an innovative teaching practice-in-action is the focus of the review, packaging the reviewer's role as one of 'data collector / researcher' has had a powerful empowering effect. PRLT has been effectively and robustly carried out with foci such as module design, assessment marking and feedback, media resources, PowerPoint presentations, fieldwork support. Examples of evidence collection 'tools' have included session transcripts, student/teaching activity grids and group working participation maps.

5) Facilitating reflective practice

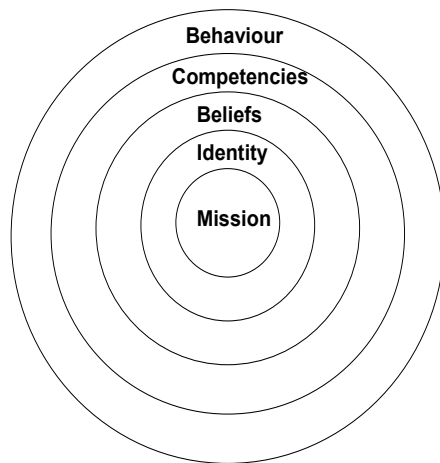
Many authors advise that reflective practice for the mutual benefit of both the reviewer and reviewed is an essential component of any PRLT process designed to enhance and value learning and teaching diversity (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2004; Beaty, 1998). Dialogue that is based on reflection, within an environment of trust and mutual ownership, will help both parties 'unpack' their practices as instinctive teachers (MacKinnon, 2001) and go beyond the assumptions that both take for granted in their approaches to teaching (Pill, 2005; Paris and Gespass, 2001).

In any organisational community, beliefs are shared and form the basis of the culture of that organisation. Culture is symbolic and influential and shapes the value placed on individuals and processes within that organisation. Where these beliefs manifest in negative perceptions and behaviour, it may be assumed that cultural change will be difficult to manage. For example, one senior colleague observed and 'scored' another teacher's performance against a standard seemingly known only to the observer. This provoked recalcitrance, reluctance and resistance. The value of PRLT was questioned and denounced as a bureaucratic process imposed under the auspices of quality control. Effective, meaningful reflective practice could not, take place within such a culture.

We believe that, in order to change perception and modify behaviour, creativity is the answer. Staff must be encouraged to look for 'bottom up' solutions rather than follow 'top down' directives. Pivotal to the success of PRLT is the notion of 'core reflection' (Korthagen and Vasolos, 2005; Figure 3) of mission, identity and beliefs. By advocating a shift in cultural norms in our organisation we have supported the concept of core reflection. PRLT actively promotes a positive, supportive environment for personal development and institutional change and creates the opportunity to improve students' learning experiences.

This in turn has had an influence on our fundamental beliefs and perceptions. Embracing this developmental ideology has had a positive impact on behaviour for all those involved with PRLT and has elicited a more open response to constructive discourse associated with PRLT activities. This culture has nurtured reflective practice, promoted a shared understanding of the value of PRLT and enabled us to build on our strengths, moving beyond the realms of teaching observation to develop a sense of identity.

Figure 3: Korthagen and Vasolos' model of Core Reflection (2005).



Facilitating meaningful reflective practice is a challenging activity but it is made easier if:

- peer partners reflect on their perceptions of the process, each other and their own teaching practices;
- the dialogue is evidence-based;
- the partners ask specific questions of the data that has been collected;
- the partners explore the related scholarly literature about their PRLT focus and consider other options and / or solutions to the problem they have set for themselves;

When these factors are present, PRLT facilitates a mutually beneficial and critically reflective discussion which results in an outcome that the participants can discuss with and disseminate to their local teaching community. Where issues of partner trust have not been fully resolved in advance of the reflective meeting, then the evidence-based nature of the process enables individuals to reflect on their own at a later time. In both cases PRLT participants report a confidence in their process outputs and a sense of empowerment to engage in more discussions about teaching with a broader spectrum of their peers.

6) Using the output

During the scoping phase of the PRLT project, former peer observation of teaching processes were described by some as a 'meaningless annual process' 'detached' and 'outside' daily teaching and learning support practices. Central to the new approach therefore has been the alignment of PRLT with existing individual and context-specific needs, practices and expectations. The PRLT process is designed to enable individuals and groups to create and use evidence to address simultaneously several aspects of their role. Reported benefits of this approach have been :

- it makes the implicit explicit and helps learning communities to articulate 'their' teaching and learning support identities;
- it can provide the basis for the annual module Quality Assurance process requirements;
- it supports the need for further development of learning support systems including student handbooks and staff induction processes;
- it provides robust evidence to inform appraisal and promotion discussion and claims;

- it provides the catalyst for reflection on and articulation of teaching practice needed to engage with the individual route submission process for HEA accreditation against the UK Professional Standards Framework.

Future Development:

So far PRLT has not been formally evaluated. Instead, we are collecting themes that people are exploring through 1) our annual programme review and evaluation submissions, 2) school-level summaries from annual performance review and 3) the evidence people are starting to put into their probation and promotion teaching portfolios.

Cardiff University is actively experimenting with PRLT and finding that it is a robust yet flexible process that aligns well with the University's Strategic Plan and is relevant to individual staff. As this paper has illustrated however, key elements in the change and embedding processes are emerging and we hope that this paper will contribute to a broader discussion to help other individuals and institutions articulate the difference between policy-holding and embedded cultural practice (Boud, 1999) in their own context.

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Web link to a collection of resources to support the process:

<http://www.cf.ac.uk/learning/themes/peerrev/index.html>

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